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Ephesians: The Series Premiere

Ephesians 1:1-2

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Today I am beginning a new series of sermons. Unlike the *Empowering Our Ministry* series which focuses on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, beginning today I am going to begin the process of working through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, verse by verse. This kind of preaching is called *expository* or *textual*, and its goal, at the end, is to give you both an overall understanding of Ephesians as well as solid teaching from the veins of gold and precious metals found within.

To some extent, the sermons of this series will take on the form of a Bible study. That's good for some people but may produce frustration in others. The pace may seem too slow or the material too stodgy. My apologies ahead of time to those who want what they want.

Ephesians was written by Paul from the home in Rome where he was under house arrest, in what we believe to be the first of two imprisonments, around the year 60 A.D. It is not a letter like Paul's other letters - it shows no traits suggestive of a special acquaintance with those addressed. In Ephesians, Paul speaks pointedly of the present work and revelation of God in Christ, and of the hope for all the world that is yet to be fulfilled.

The first part (1:15 - 2:22) describes God's perfect work. The second part (3:1 - 4:24) praises the ongoing work of God's revelation to and through his people. And the third part (4:25 - 6:20) encourages the readers to let their light shine.

Common to all is the notion that the church is but an instrument or lighthouse built for the benefit of all creation. It is not an end in itself, and it is certainly not co-extensive with the reach of God's love and realm of his kingship. As I have said before, the church is visible but not everyone who comes to church on Sunday has made a profession of faith. Only God knows for sure, and part of our common task is to preach the Word in season and out of season, that is, all the Word all the time, with the hope that those who are far from Jesus will come close.

As a letter, Ephesians is a manifesto - a tract about the love and mission of God to the world he created, and it's a primer for how we, God's people, are to be the promoters for God's love and mission to the world. And as you will often see, Ephesians is above all a prayer directed to God, and a public prayer at that.

In the first verse, I want you to notice that Paul introduces himself as an apostle. That's possible because by this point, around AD 60, Paul has been *functioning* as a spiritual leader over a number of churches and pastors. Some make a technical distinction between those who were with Jesus and those who came after, but I think the key issue is function - does the person have a ministry of leadership that transcends a particular venue? Paul clearly qualifies, and this authority has less to do with being named an apostle as having been earned by his efforts to plant and oversee congregations.

Also note that he says he was made an apostle *by the will of God*. The Greek here would suggest a different nuance. 'Will of God' might be misunderstood in the sense of a fixed plan. A better word would be 'decision,' that is, Paul was made an apostle *by the decision of Jesus*. Jesus' decision in choosing Paul is an action of the One who is living, personal, wise and powerful. God in Christ is actively at work in our midst, a theme I see almost everywhere in Scripture.

For those that are new to faith or to Scripture, please remember that 'Christ' is the Greek word for the Hebrew 'Messiah,' and that it's a title, not part of Jesus' name. But it *is* worthy of note that Ephesians is written primarily to Gentiles, who are here reminded that they receive no salvation other than the one they share with Israel and receive through the Jewish Messiah. This is exactly the same salvation promised and given to Israel. This is really highlighted by the use of the word 'saints' to describe the Christians in Ephesus to whom Paul writes - the term 'saint' was a privileged designation reserved for Israel, or for special servants of God in the Old Testament, and for angels. Pretty special when you think about it.

If there is holiness in any of us, it's present because of God alone. God alone makes holy. We can become more holy by association with God, but when the association falls apart or we go our own way, the exhibition of God's awesome holiness also fades, as the glory of the Lord faded from Moses. I could make a good argument that what Ephesians is about is how we become *sanctified* - how we learn to take on holiness, godliness, and keep growing in the Lord. You know, all I do here in this lovely new pulpit is remind you (all) of the need to follow Jesus.

Paul says that the saints in Ephesus are the faithful *in Christ Jesus*. If we at CPC confess Jesus as Lord, we are in Paul's readership too, we are objects of his concern as well. Paul is telling the Ephesian Gentile Christians that they have new life. Their new life, new being, new creation and existence are not consequences of faith, but the *nature* of faith. They don't get faith and then sometime in the future get serious about life. That's the odd disassociation of saving faith and living faith that people have invented over the past generation - the notion that you can be a 'carnal Christian,' that you can have your salvation in Jesus but live as if you are a pagan. Sorry. No. New life in Christ covers ALL of our existence - it defines us in our social relationships as much as in our doctrine. You may say 'no' to obedience, but don't ever tell me that God is OK with you keeping him at arm's length!

In the second verse, Paul speaks of the Father and of the Lord Jesus as giving 'grace and peace.' Don't think of this as a happy thought or a good wish or even like a kind offer - 'grace and peace' is a *deed*, an action given by God to us. Forgiveness isn't the primary notion behind 'grace' because, when you think about it, forgiveness presupposes sin. Forgiveness follows, comes behind sin. Without sin, there is no need for forgiveness. But grace precedes sin in every sense. Grace would exist even if there were no sin - and it does, in God, in Christ. And when you consider 'peace,' think of it as affecting the whole - our minds, our bodies, our person, our families, our economy, our political life. 'Peace' isn't about personal serenity OR a vacation from normal life. Peace on earth (Luke 2:14) is salvation for, not from, the world.

Grace, too, isn't about me as much as its about us. It's about being chosen. You have been picked to be on the team. No one is on the sidelines. We only have player-coaches on this team. You may remember a sermon I preached some time ago about Jesus as the Good Shepherd. I said then that I am not the shepherd of this congregation, but a sheep dog. My job is to keep the sheep protected and moving in the direction defined by the Good Shepherd, Jesus. So if you want to join me in leadership, you will seek to become a sheep . It's the same here: we have been chosen by Jesus to be part of his team - the church -- and the goalpost is finding a way (as a team) to glorify him.

Paul is telling the Ephesians (and us) that 'grace and peace' have now been extended beyond Israel, and that we have been included. Boy that feels good! Now, the promises have been given to the outcasts. Now the mercy of God shown to Nineveh regardless of Jonah's grudge has become true on a world-wide, unprecedented scale. Now, God is here, active, extending his work in our very midst. I tell you, this is exciting! I definitely want to be part of this! Don't you?

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